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Ecological Alienation and Artificial Intelligence in Dhruv Bhatt's *Na Iti*: An Ecocritical Reading

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Abstract: The paper analyses Dhruv Bhatt's pioneering Gujarati science fiction novel, *Na Iti* (2018), through an ecocritical framework, exploring how artificial intelligence, technological modernity, and environmental degradation intersect in regional Indian literature. Using deep ecology, material ecocriticism, and posthumanist theory, the study examines Bhatt's narrative of three planets, Iha, Pruthvi, and Bhui, each representing distinct stages in human-nature-technology relations. The protagonist KEY-10000's journey from a chip-controlled existence to ecological awareness becomes a meditation on whether AI-driven societies can maintain environmental consciousness or inevitably accelerate ecological collapse. Through analysis informed by Arne Naess, Lawrence Buell, and Stacy Alaimo, this paper demonstrates how *Na Iti* incorporates Upanishadic philosophy as both narrative structure and ecocritical methodology, contributing vital perspectives to postcolonial ecocriticism and debates about technological futures in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecological Alienation, Deep Ecology, Posthumanism, Dhruv Bhatt, Gujarati Literature.

Introduction

In an era where artificial intelligence pervades daily life and climate change threatens planetary survival, literature offers crucial spaces for imagining alternative futures and critiquing technological trajectories. Dhruv Bhatt's *Na Iti* represents a groundbreaking contribution to this discourse as arguably the first serious science fiction work in Gujarati literature. The novel transcends typical sci-fi conventions by weaving Upanishad philosophy, ecological wisdom, and speculative technology into an intellectually ambitious narrative that poses an increasingly urgent question: can humanity survive its own technological advances, or will these tools sever



our connection to the natural world that sustains us?

The novel presents three planets, Iha, Pruthvi, and Bhui, each embodying different stages of human-technology-nature interaction. Pruthvi represents AI's dystopian culmination, where neural chips govern all aspects of human existence and nature has been destroyed. Bhui, conversely, depicts a regenerated world where communities practise non-possession and nomadic sustainability after centuries without human presence. Through KEY-10000's odyssey from mechanised Pruthvi to revitalised Bhui, Bhatt examines humanity's essence in a mechanised age.

While ecocriticism has produced substantial scholarship on nature writing, Romantic poetry, and contemporary climate fiction, it has comparatively neglected regional Indian literatures, particularly those intersecting with science fiction and technology. This study addresses that gap by analyzing *Na Iti* through multiple ecocritical lenses, focusing on AI and automation's ethical implications during ecological collapse. The paper argues that Bhatt's use of the "neti neti" framework, an Upanishadic concept meaning "neither this nor that," functions as both a narrative structure and an ecocritical methodology, suggesting that ecological wisdom requires ongoing negotiation and learning rather than static technological solutions.

Deep Ecology and Biocentric Equality

Arne Naess's deep ecology challenges anthropocentric perspectives that centre human interests in environmental concerns. Naess advocates for biocentric equality, asserting that all living entities possess intrinsic value regardless of their utility to humans. This philosophy emphasizes self-realization through connection with nature, proposing that authentic ecological awareness emerges from recognizing ourselves as part of a larger web of life rather than separate from or superior to it.

Bhui's inhabitants embody this principle. Pirthi's insistence that "the mind has to be appeased" rather than controlled reflects the deep ecological insight that genuine harmony requires internal transformation, not external technological fixes (Bhatt 167). Their refusal to build permanent homes, accumulate possessions, or claim land demonstrates their understanding that nature exists for itself, not for human exploitation—what Naess terms "ecological self-realization."

Environmental Imagination and Active Nature

Lawrence Buell's concept of environmental imagination provides another analytical lens. Buell argues that



environmental literature must compel readers to perceive the environment as a dynamic process rather than a static entity, recognise the interconnection between human and natural history, and envision the nonhuman world as an active presence rather than a mere backdrop (Buell 7-8). *Na Iti* fulfils these criteria admirably. Bhui regenerates itself, responds to human actions, and ultimately teaches KEY the limitations of his technologically-informed worldview that it functions as protagonist rather than setting.

Transcorporeality and Embodied Connection

Stacy Alaimo's transcorporeality concept offers insight into KEY's transformation. Alaimo contends that human bodies are not closed systems but "trans-corporeal" perpetually engaging with and altered by the material world (Alaimo 2). On Pruthvi, chips physically implanted in bodies represent distorted transcorporeality, where technology rather than nature infiltrates and shapes human organisms. The chips alter neural connections, affecting not only behaviour but consciousness itself. KEY's chip removal thus signifies restored natural transcorporeality, enabling authentic engagement with Bhui's material environment instead of algorithmic control.

Upanishadic Epistemological Humility

The novel's incorporation of "neti neti" from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad deserves particular attention. This principle asserts that ultimate reality (Brahman) is ineffable and approachable only through negation: "not this, not that." This epistemological humility sharply contrasts with the technological hubris of Iha and Pruthvi's inhabitants, who presume they can devise perfect solutions to ecological challenges. Bhatt suggests that authentic ecological wisdom requires comparable humility, acknowledging that nature's complexity surpasses human comprehension and that every attempt to regulate or predict it will ultimately prove insufficient.

Pruthvi: The Algorithmic Colonisation of Consciousness

Pruthvi embodies technological modernity's logical endpoint, a world where AI has eliminated human unpredictability by abolishing human freedom. From birth, neural chips govern every aspect of existence: career assignments, sleep schedules, nutrition (replaced by tablets), and reproduction. The result is a perfectly efficient society that has achieved complete environmental destruction. Bhatt's description is chilling: contaminated ground requires impermeable shoes, toxic air necessitates masks, and sealed living spaces



demand constant oxygen pumping (Bhatt 9-10). Nature has not been subdued; it has been obliterated.

Algorithmic Alienation

What makes Pruthvi ecocritically significant is Bhatt's connection between technological control of bodies and environmental devastation. The chips don't merely regulate behaviour; they sever the sensory and emotional connections linking humans to nature. Pruthvi's inhabitants cannot feel ground beneath their feet, smell air, or experience emotional bonds that once connected people to places and communities. KEY's dream of walking a beach with his loved one without protective gear becomes not only physically impossible but also emotionally incomprehensible. The capacity to value and protect nature disappears alongside the ability to directly experience it.

This represents what might be termed algorithmic alienation. Marx's alienation theory posited that industrial capitalism estranges workers from their labour's products, the labour process itself, their species-being, and each other. Bhatt extends this analysis to show how AI engenders more comprehensive alienation encompassing not just labour but consciousness itself. When KEY's chip dictates "log in" and "log out" times, human existence becomes mere data processing. Life transforms from something actively lived into something passively endured.

The Commodification of Emotion

The novel's most potent critique emerges through its treatment of emotion and relationships. When KEY feels attracted to ZED, the chips interpret this as reproductive necessity and schedule their coupling. After ZED gives birth, no genuine bond forms because chips haven't programmed such connections. The catastrophic climax—KEY's escape attempt resulting in the chips "deleting" ZED and their baby—reveals technological control's violence. The word choice matters: not "killing" but "deleting", as though human lives were corrupted files requiring removal. This linguistic shift exposes how the chip system commodifies and dehumanises life.

From an ecocritical perspective, Pruthvi illustrates what happens when instrumental rationality, viewing nature solely as a resource, extends to humans themselves. The same logic justifying strip-mining, deforestation, and species extinction for economic gain now justifies total consciousness regulation for social efficiency. Bhatt posits these as not separate processes but expressions of a singular fallacy: the conviction that life can be reduced to manageable data, complexity eliminated through control, and technology substituted for the chaotic yet productive relationships inherent in ecological systems and human communities.



Bhui: Indigenous Wisdom and Ecological Regeneration

If Pruthvi represents ecological death through technological domination, Bhui represents regeneration possibility through biocentric living and indigenous knowledge. KEY's crash-landing on what he assumed was a dead planet reveals something contradicting everything his technological worldview taught him: that nature has healed itself autonomously. Forests have regrown, rivers run clean, and diverse species thrive not through technological management but through nature's inherent processes.

Radical Ecological Humility

Bhui's inhabitants, guided by Yunjan and Nemi's teachings, practise what could be termed radical ecological humility. They have intentionally structured their society around principles preventing the exploitation and destruction that devastated Iha and Pruthvi. Their fundamental principle is non-possession: "The day when we will settle ourselves at one place, make houses for us by digging the land and cultivate grains will also create a feeling of 'my and mine' in our minds," Pirthi explains (Bhatt 166). This insight links private property and sedentary agriculture developments many historians consider foundational to civilization with ecological degradation's roots.

This way of life embodies Naess's "identification with nature", viewing themselves not as separate from or superior to the natural world. They request food from Bhui rather than taking it, move nomadically to allow ecosystem regeneration, and refuse ownership or permanent structures that would make land "theirs." This lifestyle demands constant awareness of ecological limits and seasonal rhythms—what technological societies often dismiss as primitive but Bhatt portrays as sophisticated and sustainable.

Language, Gender, and Ecological Consciousness

The novel's treatment of language and communication on Bhui merits special attention. KEY initially cannot understand the inhabitants' speech. This linguistic alienation metaphorically represents ecological alienation; just as KEY must learn Bhui's language, he must learn to interpret the natural environment, comprehending its signals and rhythms. His gradual language acquisition mirrors his ecological education.

Particularly significant is how Bhui's people gender planets as female. Yunjan insists on feminine pronouns, arguing that anyone truly understanding nature's regenerative capacity would recognise this maternal dimension (Bhatt 3). This linguistic practice exemplifies the ecofeminist assertion that women's subjugation and nature's



domination are interrelated ideologies. By refusing to use neutral or masculine language, Bhui's inhabitants maintain linguistic awareness of their dependence on planetary processes that nurture and sustain life.

Embodied Knowledge versus Data

KEY's relationship with Pirthi explores the distinction between technological and ecological modes of being. When KEY suggests removing the "possession gene" through genetic engineering—essentially proposing that technology could fix human greed—Pirthi rejects this. She argues that mind and desire constitute essential aspects of humanity, unlike the chip, which is external hardware. The solution isn't engineering away human traits but transforming consciousness through practice and relationships. When she places KEY's hand on her pregnant belly, she provides direct, embodied knowledge transcending any database's capacity (Bhatt 167).

The novel's climax revolves around KEY's understanding of possession and its ecological ramifications. After the monkey incident—where his violent reaction to the theft of his hard drives frightens away animals—he realises his attachment to technological artefacts (data drives containing Pruthvi's history) makes him complicit in the same destructive patterns that destroyed his home planet. His decision to cast the drives into the sea and launch his spaceship back into space transcends symbolic rejection; it embodies the deep ecological principle that genuine transformation requires relinquishing the ego's demands for control, ownership, and permanence.

Neti Neti: Perpetual Learning as an Ecocritical Method

The novel's title and philosophical framework—"neti neti" or "neither this nor that"—provides its most nuanced ecocritical perspective. This Upanishadic concept asserts that ultimate reality cannot be definitively described; we can only approach it through continuous negation and refinement of understanding. Bhatt applies this epistemological principle to ecological knowledge, proposing that no single solution exists to environmental crisis, no perfect mode of human-nature interaction, but rather an ongoing process of learning, adaptation, and humility.

Structural Embodiment of Uncertainty

The novel's structure itself exemplifies this principle. By presenting three planets with distinct approaches to human-nature relations, Bhatt refuses simple answers to environmental problems. Iha's advanced technology couldn't prevent collapse. Pruthvi's superior AI systems produced living death. Bhui's return to simplicity and



natural harmony appears sustainable, yet the novel doesn't prescribe this as the universal solution. Instead, it suggests each context requires unique approaches, and any approach will eventually encounter new challenges demanding new responses.

This framework carries significant implications for contemporary environmental discourse. Much climate change discussion seeks definitive solutions: renewable energy, carbon capture, population control, and economic restructuring. *Na Iti* suggests such measures may be necessary but never sufficient. The belief that we can "solve" environmental problems through appropriate technology or policy embodies the same arrogance that produced Pruthvi's demise. Authentic ecological wisdom requires acknowledging human limitations of knowledge and natural systems' irreducible complexity.

Adaptive Wisdom

KEY's journey exemplifies this epistemological humility. He begins with complete faith in technological knowledge stored in chips and hard drives. Confronted with Bhui's different way of life, his initial response is argumentative—suggesting improvements and attempting to apply Pruthvi's technological civilisation's lessons. Through experience and relationships rather than abstract learning, he discovers his prior knowledge wasn't wrong but incomplete and context-specific. Knowledge that might have saved Iha fails on Pruthvi. Practices sustaining Bhui might not work elsewhere. Crucially, no knowledge body can remain static; ever-changing ecological conditions demand continuous reassessment and adaptation.

This concept of perpetual learning resembles what ecologists call "adaptive management"—treating environmental interventions as experiments rather than solutions and adjusting based on outcomes. It also aligns with indigenous environmental practices prioritising observation, relationship, and respect for nature's autonomy over control and manipulation. By conceptualising ecological knowledge as a "neti neti" process—neither this fixed understanding nor that one, but perpetually advancing toward more appropriate relationships with the natural world—Bhatt provides a philosophical foundation for sustainable human existence.

Conclusion: Toward an Ecocentric Future

Dhruv Bhatt's *Na Iti* makes a significant contribution to ecocritical discourse by demonstrating how artificial intelligence and technological modernity can manifest ecological alienation. The novel reveals that the environmental crisis stems not from insufficient advanced technology but from the mindset positioning



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technology as the answer. Pruthvi's chips don't merely control behavior—they sever sensory, emotional, and spiritual connections linking humans to nature. Without these connections, environmental destruction becomes inevitable, as individuals forfeit the capacity to appreciate or even recognise what is being lost.

The novel's integration of Upanishadic philosophy with ecological themes provides regional Indian literature a distinctive voice in global environmental conversation. The "neti neti" framework posits that ecological wisdom requires epistemological humility, acknowledging nature's complexity surpasses human comprehension, and sustainable living demands perpetual learning rather than static solutions. This perspective challenges both technological optimism and environmental pessimism, advocating continuous engagement characterised by attentiveness, adaptation, and reverence for natural processes operating independently of human intention.

KEY's transformation from chip-controlled entity to ecologically aware individual mirrors the transition humanity must undergo to survive the Anthropocene. His journey demonstrates that genuine ecological transformation requires more than new policies or technologies—it necessitates a fundamental consciousness shift. The novel poses a critical question: can AI-governed societies maintain the emotional and sensory connection with nature necessary for ecological survival, or does algorithmic living inevitably produce environmental and spiritual death?

As artificial intelligence increasingly pervades daily life—from smartphones to smart cities—*Na Iti* offers a timely warning about over-reliance on technology's environmental consequences. Bhatt suggests each innovation altering our natural environment interaction may diminish our capacity for authentic ecological awareness. The novel doesn't advocate regression to pre-technological eras; rather, it asserts that sustainable futures must prioritise direct, embodied engagement with nature over algorithmic governance and mediation.

Finally, *Na Iti* illuminates regional literatures' importance to ecocritical scholarship. While environmental discourse predominantly focuses on Western texts and perspectives, Bhatt demonstrates that Gujarati literature—rooted in indigenous wisdom while engaging contemporary concerns—provides essential insights into the global ecological crisis. The novel's synthesis of Vedic philosophy, tribal knowledge systems, and speculative futures creates a distinctly Indian climate fiction contribution that both enriches and challenges mainstream environmental narratives. As the world confronts unprecedented ecological challenges, we require



diverse voices and perspectives—including those from regional Indian literatures—to imagine alternative futures and critique current trajectories. *Na Iti* demonstrates such voices' capacity to contribute meaningfully to our collective struggle for planetary survival.

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